

Centre for Community  
Child Health



# Supporting children and families to thrive in their relationships

An Options Paper for Relationships Australia Victoria

FINAL  
November 2024

*Relationships Australia*  
VICTORIA



## **Supporting children and families to thrive in their relationships: An Options Paper for Relationships Australia Victoria**

Version: [FINAL: November 2024]

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This report was prepared by the Centre for Community Child Health on behalf of Relationships Australia Victoria.

### **Suggested citation**

Alexander, S., Prichard, P., Moore, T. and Heery, L. (2024) Supporting children and families to thrive in their relationships: An Options Paper for Relationships Australia Victoria. Parkville, Victoria: Centre for Community Child Health, Murdoch Children's Research Institute.

We would like to thank all participants (parents/carers, RAV staff and staff from partnering organisations) in Workshops 1 and 2 of this project and acknowledge their input and expertise.

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*The Centre for Community Child Health acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land on which we work and pay our respect to Elders past and present.*



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# Background

## About this report

This is the second of two outputs for the *Supporting children and families to thrive in their relationships* project, undertaken by the Centre for Community Child Health for Relationships Australia Victoria (RAV). The first report contained an overview of the context and evidence regarding supporting children and families to thrive in their relationships. This report provides an overview of options for consideration by RAV, to further their influence on positive systems change. The options presented in this report arise from the workshopping of findings from the context and evidence review with RAV staff, parents/carers and partnering organisations. The term parent in this report is inclusive of all primary caregivers, including biological parents, kinship carers, adoptive parents, foster carers, and any other individuals who provide primary care and support to a child.

## About Relationships Australia Victoria

As a state-wide, community based, non-profit organisation that provides family and relationship support services, Relationships Australia Victoria (RAV)'s vision is for positive, respectful, safe and fulfilling relationships for all Australians. RAV offers a range of relationship services across the prevention, early intervention and response spectrum, including 'early matters', a preventative and early intervention program for parents in the early years. The early matters program currently includes offerings such as ante- and post-natal information sessions, Circle of Security (Parenting), Tuning in to Kids, Tuning in to Teens, and individualised family support sessions.

Relationships Australia Victoria (RAV) is interested in understanding how they can best influence positive systems change with their prevention and early intervention services, and therefore commissioned the Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH) to undertake an evidence and context review and develop an options paper to inform their future directions.

## About the project

There is a wealth of evidence pointing to the range of needs that children have to grow and develop optimally. In a recent review of the literature, Moore (2021) groups these needs under six headings: relational needs, safety and protection needs, health and nutrition needs, learning and activity needs, environmental and material needs, and service needs. Specific to relational needs, children require positive early caregiving relationships as well as exposure to a range of other adults, families and children. Moore notes that "the single most important factor in promoting positive psychosocial, emotional, and behavioural well-being is having a strong, secure attachment to their primary caregivers" (2021, p. 25) and that there are a number of factors that may get in the way of this secure attachment forming, including



parent mental health concerns, history of poor attachment with their caregivers, and stressful family circumstances.

This project aims to develop a range of evidence and stakeholder-informed options for Relationships Australia Victoria to consider in order to grow their preventative early childhood/parenting offers. RAV aim to develop and trial these options initially with the Ballarat community as they have a large early years presence in the area. An iterative co-design process has been adopted to i) reach agreement on the challenges to be addressed (i.e. undertaking an evidence review and then making sense of this), then ii) consider the options for RAV, producing recommendations tailored to RAV's specific needs and circumstances (i.e. development of an options paper). A review of the context and evidence around strengthening relationships in the early years was undertaken, followed by two workshops with key stakeholders to make sense of this review, generate options for RAV to pursue in light of the review, and then prioritise and describe a handful of options.

The project aims to address the following questions.

- As a specialist provider of family and relationship services, where can RAV best focus their attention and leverage the early years landscape to influence positive systems change?
- What are RAV's options to best influence social/systems change through prevention and early intervention strategies?
- What is the evidence underpinning RAV's existing prevention/early intervention-oriented initiatives (including early matters) and how might the organisation build on these in their ambition to positively influence the system towards prevention/early intervention?

This project will initially inform a trial of options in Ballarat, with a view to scaling up to an organization-wide strategy to provide prevention and early intervention initiatives for families and children adapted to the context and needs of local communities.

## About systems change

RAV came to CCCH to assist them in a process of exploring – *not* which new program or service to run – but rather how RAV could best influence the system to promote positive family relationships for children. As discussed in the first output of this project, in order to meet the core needs of children and for families to thrive in their relationships, change is required across multiple systems e.g. safe and suitable housing, family friendly employment, access to healthy foods, safe inclusive neighbourhoods, and a cohesive early years service system (Alexander et al., 2024). Bringing about systems change is, however, an enormous undertaking. An analysis of fifteen case studies of successful philanthropic efforts to create systems change, found that large scale changes often took two or more decades, involved government policy and funding changes; and needed sector collaboration and coordination





(Wolf-Ditkoff & Grindle, 2017). The end goal of systems change is a positive and enduring change for society and the people within it (Bolton & Davies, 2021).

### *Ways of influencing systems change*

Although an enormous undertaking, there are several frameworks *that offer guidance around how to* influence systems change. We describe two here that can be applied to RAV's selection of options.

In their 'green paper,' Leadbeater and Winhall (2020) described systemic challenges as being typically rooted in the mismatch between institutions created in the past and the needs of today's rapidly changing society. Leadbeater and Winhall (2020) argued that system innovation is required, and therefore more likely, when there is both a 'push', a systematic challenge that requires a systemic response (e.g. concerns about the state of family relationships) and a 'pull', when society is provided with a systemic opportunity for change. The context and evidence review (Alexander et al., 2024) provides details around the 'push' identified by RAV, and we identify a number of current 'pulls' further down in this section, that can enable RAV to influence the system for good.

Leadbeater and Winhall (2020) offer three ways of creating systems change. The first is to consider **working across different levels**. In order to create systems change, they state the need to be working at macro, meso and micro levels simultaneously (see Figure 1).

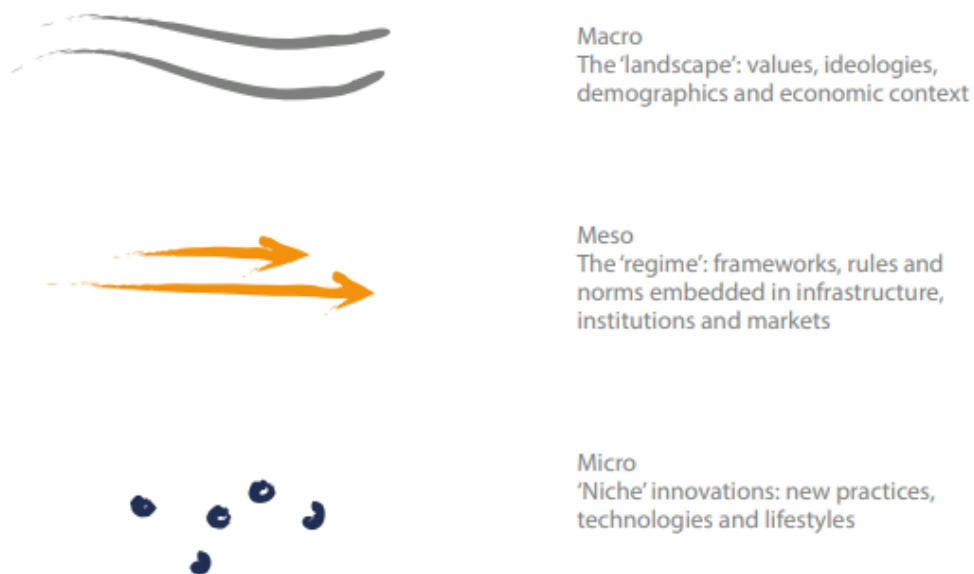


Figure 1: Three levels of systems change (Leadbeater & Winhall, 2020)



The second is to consider **working on one or more of the four keys for unlocking systems change**, as described below.

- 1) Purpose – the purpose of a system is what the people and activities within a system are centred around. Powerful systems change arises when the purpose of a system changes.
- 2) Power – changing the purpose of a system can change and challenge who has power within that system.
- 3) Resource flows – resources in a system can include technology, knowledge, finances and reputation. Systems change involves new ways of using these resources to achieve better outcomes.
- 4) Relationships – “All systems are fundamentally relational” (Leadbeater & Winhall, 2020, p. 34) and systems change can occur when new patterns are made in the relationships between the various actors in the system.

The third is to consider **playing one or more of the roles required for systems change**. They explained that significant systems change does not tend to come about just from the efforts of activities of a single person or organisation and there are multiple roles that may be played in the process including:

- 1) Entrepreneurs – pioneers, opening pathways to new ways of doing and being.
- 2) Inside-outsiders – people who are in the system but understand its limitations and enable people from outside to come in to help change it.
- 3) Commissioners – decision-makers with the power to bring the new system into being.
- 4) Historians – academics or people who have an extensive experience of the system who can illuminate why it developed the way it did, aiding understanding of other possibilities.
- 5) Visionaries – who can imagine and articulate a better way of doing things in the future.
- 6) Consumers – can show the reality of how an innovation or systems change works or not in the real world.
- 7) Framework setters – create the new frameworks for the regulations and policies for the new system, enabling the innovation to unfurl more broadly.
- 8) Exiters – unwind the old systems to make way for the new.
- 9) Auditors and evaluators – keep systems accountable and create ways of measuring the effectiveness of the new system.

Bolton and Davies (2021) offer another way of looking at effecting large scale change in their ‘Routes to Scale’ framework. They describe the following 18 strategic levers:



- 1) Create supply and demand – this may be done for example, through increasing awareness or eliminating barriers
- 2) Unlock capital – this could be securing new funding or repurposing existing resources
- 3) Design for mass reach – designing something simple and scalable
- 4) Expand the organisation
- 5) Use new vehicles – such as through mergers or joint ventures with other organisations or franchising or licencing agreements.
- 6) Adapt business model for scale – this may involve changing a current model to make it more easily scalable such as through some sort of technical innovation.
- 7) Develop talent – workforce development could occur through bringing staff with different expertise or through training current or future decision-makers.
- 8) Harness collective effort – bringing different organisations together or creating networks or communities of practice.
- 9) Shape sector practice – this may be done through the provision of ideas, tools, or other support.
- 10) Build the evidence base – make an argument and share the evidence-base for the need for change.
- 11) Use data for transparency and insight – use data to illuminate issues
- 12) Alter or reallocate funding – show how existing funds could be used more effectively
- 13) Establish new institutions – create a new role, body, or institution
- 14) Improve regulation and standards – create new models, standards, or principles
- 15) Create feedback loops – show the relationship between actions, decisions, and outcomes for systems improvement
- 16) Mobilise a shared voice – bring people together for a united message for change in the sector
- 17) Attract media spotlight – motivate people with a media spotlight to alter the public conversation.
- 18) Challenge the status quo –question the status quo, and campaign for change.

In summary, systems change can be brought about through working across varying levels and roles, using a range of keys and strategies.

### *Systemic opportunities to create a new system*

Systems change is more likely to come about when those wanting to influence the system can “catch a wave of change to take them forward” (Leadbeater & Winhall, 2020, p. 22). For RAV, there are three such systemic opportunities, or ‘pulls’, to consider. The first is the long-awaited review of the Family Relationships Services Program (FRSP) (Metcalf, 2024); the second is the National Early Years Strategy (Australian Government, 2024); and the third is the Ballarat Community Saturation Model (Respect Victoria, 2024):





### *The Family Relationships Services Program (FRSP) review*

The FRSP was established by the Australian federal government in 2006 to assist families going through separation to resolve disputes regarding children and property without having to use the court system (Metcalfe, 2024). Relationships Australia Victoria is a leading provider of the FRSP. Metcalfe (2024) identified a range of challenges that align with those outlined in the first report from this project including:

- Families appear to be facing a more complex array of challenges than they were in previous generations,
- There is a lack of coordination between services,
- There are greater barriers to service access for some people than others,
- Recruitment, retention and training of staff is widespread problem,
- Funding is limited, and
- Measuring outcomes is complicated.

Alongside the challenges, the following opportunities were identified:

- Improving the focus on children's rights and child voice through child-inclusive practice (CIP),
- Integrating services (instead of siloed approaches),
- Creating partnerships between universal services and specialist services,
- Place-based approaches, and
- Improving data collection to identify outcomes for children and families.

Finally, the some of the key recommendations of the FRSP review included (but were not limited to):

- To reframe the state of objectives with an emphasis on children's needs, and facilitate child participation and voice,
- To provide information and awareness so families know where to go for help,
- Greater flexibility in program delivery, design and operations, including enhancing online service delivery options,
- Hubs should enable universal services access for all families, provide wrap-around support, and there should be greater collaboration between services, and
- To improve data collection with a focus on outcome measures.

Overall, the FRSP review aligns closely with the context and evidence review in the identification of challenges to be contended with. The opportunities identified and the recommendations of the review offer RAV the possibility of both financial and strategic support for the options identified in this paper.



### *The National Early Years Strategy (EYS)*

The Australian Government's Early Years Strategy (EYS) (2024-2034) aims to set the direction nationally for the next decade to help all Australian children to thrive. The EYS acknowledges that accessing supports for children is challenging for families as the system is complicated and fragmented (Australian Government, 2024). The importance of rectifying these challenges is highlighted, as the early years is the most influential developmental stage throughout the lifespan (Australian Government, 2024). The brain develops at high speed in the first few years of life, and this pace is never repeated (Australian Government, 2024). The EYS aims to reduce service system silos so that families can access integrated, coordinated, and affordable early learning, maternal and child health services and parenting services. These services, according to the EYS, should be informed by and responsive to, family and community needs, and include home visiting options (Australian Government, 2024).

There are eight outcomes being sought through the EYS. In direct alignment with this project, the first outcome listed is for children to be supported to develop strong, secure relationships with their parents and caregivers. The other outcomes are also aligned with RAV's aim to help children and families thrive in their relationships, such as:

- Parents and children having their core needs met
- Parents and children being enabled to connect socially and emotionally with peers and
- Parents and children feeling safe and included in their communities.

The key strategies in the EYS included:

- Raising awareness about the importance of the early years of child development
- Supporting children and families to be heard
- Building the skills and confidence of parents
- Helping families connect with each other
- Ensuring solutions are flexible, community-led and localised, and
- Making policies, programs and services collaborative and integrated.

Overall, the EYS reinforces the focus on early intervention and prevention, and the need for children and their caregivers to have their core needs met, not least of which being their relational needs. Once again, the need for localised, community-based and led, integrated and collaborative services are emphasised.

### *The Ballarat Community Saturation Model (BCSM)*

The third possible systemic opportunity presenting for RAV, is the Ballarat Community Saturation Model (BCSM) (Respect Victoria, 2024). The community of Ballarat called for action this year following a spate of gender-based violence. The Victorian State Government has responded with a four-year project, employing a saturation model to be designed by the local community (Respect Victoria, 2024). Respect Victoria (2024) described the saturation model



as inundating a geographical area with a multitude of overlapping activities to address the problem, so that local people experience a more intense, reinforced effect.

It is yet unknown, what the chosen activities making up the BCSM will be. As such, an opportunity exists for RAV to influence the model to be inclusive of strategies focussed on strengthening relationships in families with young children; between the adults, and between children and their parents/carers.



# Project design and methods

## Overall project design

This project was undertaken in two phases.

The first phase included a review of the early years context, the evidence regarding how to support children and families to thrive in their relationships, and the evidence regarding RAV's existing early intervention and prevention service offerings. This review and its method are contained in a separate paper (Alexander et al., 2024). The authors of the context and evidence review from CCCH then conducted a half-day stakeholder workshop to share this information and gather ideas and priorities for action for RAV to consider.

The second phase of the project involved analysis of the data from the first workshop being presented to RAV in an earlier draft of this Options Paper, along with an overview of systems theory. A second workshop was then held to share this data analysis and overview of systems theory with stakeholders, to support the stakeholders in further refining and clarifying the prioritised ideas for action.

## Context and evidence review

A pragmatic review<sup>1</sup> was undertaken involving the identification, review and synthesis of relevant published and grey literature pertinent to the following five areas:

1. The core conditions that young children and their families need in order to flourish
2. The current early years scene and the challenges faced by children, families, communities and services
3. The approaches that have been used to address these challenges and how effective these have been
4. How to redesign the early years environment to ensure that all children and their families are provided with the core care conditions they need to flourish
5. The evidence underpinning RAV's existing prevention/early intervention initiatives including early matters.

The review drew on 106 publications including 24 meta-analyses/systematic reviews. Publications included books, journal articles, reports from relevant think tanks, government reports, RAV's internal reviews, and other recent reviews undertaken by CCCH. Publications were identified through key word searches of databases including PubMed, PsychINFO, and Google Scholar, searches of websites of key projects or interventions, and snowballing from references in relevant studies. While neither systematic nor exhaustive, the pragmatic

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<sup>1</sup> A pragmatic review adapts the conventional systematic review process to take into consideration limited time and/or resources available



approach taken to the review enabled an efficient, timely, and problem-focused response to RAV.

## Workshop 1

CCCH conducted a half-day workshop in September 2024 in Ballarat. Participants were staff from RAV (9) including some members of the project working group, parents/carers (6) who were current or former services users of RAV's early matters program, and professionals from other local organisations servicing children and families (5).

The workshop involved a presentation of the key content of the context and evidence review (Alexander et al., 2024) followed by a series of small group activities where participants explored potential avenues of action for RAV from a broad systemic idealistic viewpoint down to more practical and easily actionable ideas. (For details of the workshop, see Appendix 1).

The data collected from the small groups were thematically analysed to identify a range of potential strategies for RAV.

## Workshop 2

The second workshop was conducted by the same facilitators as the first workshop, again for a half day, in October 2024. All participants from Workshop 1 were invited to attend. There were four apologies. Of the 16 who attended, 8 were staff members from RAV, 3 were parents/caregivers, and 5 were professionals from other local agencies organisations providing services to children and families.

The aim of the second workshop was to assess the validity of data analysis (member check/respondent validation); refine the options and priorities; see if there has been anything missed or new to add; then to gather more detail around what the prioritised ideas looked like and how they might be actioned.

The workshop involved a presentation of the findings from the analysis of the data collected in Workshop 1 (i.e. the options for RAV to explore), followed by a series of conversations to validate the data and identify the top priorities, and then deeper small group conversations to unpack the detail of the three priorities identified. (For details of the workshop, see Appendix 2).

Each of the groups nominated a scribe who noted key points from the discussion on butcher's paper. Each group included one of the workshop facilitators to assist with facilitating discussion and answering questions if required, and to gain a deeper understanding of the discussions beyond the written notes provided by the groups. The data from each group was analysed and then summarised, to convey the detail described in the conversation.





# Findings

## Context and evidence review

The context and evidence review (Alexander et al., 2024) found that:

- For children and families to flourish, their core needs must be met, and these are largely relational for both parents and children (Moore, 2024). The quality of parent-child relationships is foundational to developmental and relational outcomes across the lifespan (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016).
- Children and parents/caregivers experience multiple challenges which work against the formation of positive parent-child relationships (Cyr et al., 2010). These challenges and the resulting problems that may develop for children and families are targeted with numerous services in a complex, siloed, service system that can be difficult for families to navigate and access (Moore, 2021).
- Approaches used to address these problems include clinical services, parenting programs, attachment interventions, and playgroups (Moore, 2021). Positive outcomes are supported by services being delivered in a relational, strengths-based manner, involving participants in the design and providing them choice (Moore, 2021).
- If we were to redesign the early years environments to support children and parents/caregivers to thrive in their relationships we would: provide safe spaces to connect with other families; build parental knowledge; and create integrated family hubs, to simplify and soften access to both universal and specialist services (Moore, 2021).
- Finally, that the evidence to support RAV's existing prevention and early intervention initiatives included that support was offered early. Additionally, supports were often provided in collaboration with other service providers, in a range of universal environments. Home visiting is available to support connection with families facing more barriers to service access, and there is a focus on including fathers. Ongoing data is gathered and used to continually improve service offerings. There are a range of programs offered by RAV and they are supported by evidence and program logic. While there is still limited evidence for *Circle of Security – Parenting* (COS-P) (Risholm Mothander et al., 2018), the evidence for *Tuning in to Kids* includes numerous randomised-control trials (Zahl-Olsen et al., 2023).

For more detailed findings from the review, please see Alexander et al., 2024.



## Workshop 1

### Themes

Participants in the first workshop listed over 100 ideas for action or points for consideration from their discussions. These ideas and points were thematically analysed, identifying twelve broad ideas (as well as group of miscellaneous ideas titled ‘sundry’). The themes identified are listed in order of volume of response, and described as follows:

Theme	Volume	Description
Place-based services/Hubs	18	Offering supports and services where families gather and/or other services are offered
Important Service qualities	17	Offering services in a particular way e.g. psychologically and physically accessible, practical and validating
Social Coordinator	12	Creating a social coordinator role to connect families with each other
Journey of Life	8	Providing support and services across the life course e.g. expanding work done in schools
Home Visiting	7	Extending availability of support and services provided in the home
Stigma	6	Reducing or eliminating societal judgement experienced by caregivers and families
Relationship Promotion	6	Promoting the understanding across the community of importance of healthy relationships
The Village	5	Supporting the creation of communities for families
Collaboration	4	Collaborating with other organisations perhaps providing a community backbone like the Yarra CTC Partnership
Technology	4	Considering the benefits and drawbacks of technology
Advocacy	3	Advocating for change and the funding to help change happen
Core Needs	2	Meeting the core needs of families
Sundry Ideas	9	These included: teaching social skills to parents, weekend playgroups, review RAV policies with lens of co-design, look at opportunities from Foundation Supports arising from NDIS review

Table 1. Themes identified from Workshop 1 data (for more detailed information, see Appendix 3.)

### Priorities

The fourth and final discussion exercise at the first workshop was for participant groups to select their priorities for action or points they most wished to emphasise the importance of.



Overall, there were 24 points or ideas that participants wished to highlight, and these priority points have also been grouped in the themes identified above and displayed below in order of volume:

Theme	Volume	Description
Important Service Qualities	6	Easily accessible, soft entry, no silos, free, variety/choice, for face-to-face options
Social Coordinator	5	Professional or peer role focussed on connecting families
Place-based services/hub	4	Safe spaces to access services and connect with other families
Core Needs	1	Everyone needs somewhere safe and secure to live
Journey of Life	1	Extend work in school
Relationship Promotion	1	Public health campaign to reinforce that relationships are key
Home Visits	1	Return to home visiting
Stigma	1	Eliminate societal judgment
Technology	1	Negative impact on connection
Sundry ideas	3	Build relational skills of parents and conduct action research on post-COVID school attendance

Table 2. Themes identified from Workshop 1 data (for more detailed information, see Appendix 4.)

### *Summary of findings using a systems change lens*

Mindful of the findings from Alexander et al., 2024, we summarise the proposed ideas from Workshop 1 within the systems change frameworks already described.

RAV could perhaps be seen in the role of Inside-Outsiders, understanding that the present early years services system context has limitations and inviting in others, including those who use the services, to help them change it (Leadbeater & Winhall, 2020). RAV may also be seen as Entrepreneurs – leading the way to new ways of doing things (Leadbeater & Winhall, 2020).

Next, we consider the keys that could assist RAV in influencing the system at the three levels of change (Leadbeater and Winhall, 2020) – macro, meso and micro. At the **macro level**, the broader philosophical and societal change ideas arising from the workshop data included those themed as Stigma, The Village, and Core Needs. These themes may be reflective of a vision of an ideal society in which to raise children. There is an understanding that the whole of society has a role to play in creating an environment in which children and families have their core needs met and feel included, supported, and connected, and are thus enabled to



thrive in their relationships. This visionary ideal could potentially be considered through the lens of Leadbeater and Winhall's (2020) keys, as the new purpose of the system.

At the **meso level** we group the suggestions regarding infrastructure, policy and regulation such as Place-Based Services/Hubs, Collaboration, and Advocacy. Grouped together these themes may connote a need to work more closely with both other service providers (other Insider-Outsiders?), Consumers, and Commissioners – the decision-makers and funders. The keys involved here may include Power, Resource flows, and Relationships.

While the focus of this project is on the macro, the bulk of the data relates to the **micro level** – ideas for roles or programs. The themes that are grouped at the micro level include Important Service Qualities, Social Coordinator, Journey of Life, Home Visiting, Parent/Peer Roles, Technology and the Sundry Ideas. Relationship Promotion may be considered at the micro level as a service but is also connected to the macro level as there was a desire conveyed regarding a society that understood the importance of relationships and community. It could be argued at the micro level that all four of Leadbeater's (2020) keys apply – purpose, power, resources, and relationships. The data within these themes appears centred around a new purpose – rather than providing services to prevent relationship problems or to intervene early in them, the purpose is perhaps to influence the system/society to create conditions in which children and families can thrive in their relationships. This new purpose requires a power shift to enable children and families a clear voice in the design of services and facilities, and even different roles in participation and operation. Resource flows may have to change to facilitate working more closely with other service providers, sharing spaces, and changing priorities. Finally, new relationship patterns would arise from the changing role and power of children and families, the connections with other providers, and the need to continue to influence in all directions regarding the new purpose.

In terms of the strategic levers that could facilitate change (Bolton & Davies, 2021), it could easily be argued that all 18 of Bolton & Davies' (2021) strategic levers could be applied to RAV's task of influencing the system. One of the workshop-generated ideas, for example, was for RAV to run a public health campaign to promote community understanding of the importance of relationships and to use the media and perhaps a celebrity to get this message out. This strategy aligns with strategy 17, attracting a media spotlight. Other strategic levers that may be readily applicable to the workshop ideas include creating supply and demand through increasing awareness and reducing barriers, harnessing collective effort or mobilising a shared voice through involving parents and other service providers. Unlocking capital or reallocating funding are possibilities as is using data for transparency, to highlight issues. Consideration could also be given to the role RAV could play in shaping sector practice and developing talent. In undertaking this project, RAV are already challenging the status quo and building the evidence-base.



Finally, we turn to the potential opportunity presented to catch the winds of change that may arise from the FRSP review, the EYS, and the BCSM. For example, of the 16 key recommendations in the FRSP review, there are at least 11 which align with the both the context and evidence review of this project and the data generated in the first workshop. Overall, there is a drive to create an environment for families in which they know where to go for help and that this help is easily accessible to them; universal and specialist services work flexibly together to provide wrap-around support for families; the needs and voices of children are emphasised, and additional/alternative efforts are made to reduce barriers to service access for families. Similarly, the EYS is driving a national agenda to raise awareness about the importance of the early years of development, and for service delivery to be community-led, localised, collaborative, and integrated. The BCSM promises to attract funding to Ballarat to implement a multitude of overlapping strategies, providing a unique opportunity for RAV to tender for funding for new ideas.

A key recommendation from both the FRSP review and the EYS, that is relevant but did not arise in the workshop data, involves having a focus on outcomes, and collecting the data to measure these.

### *Emerging options*

The analysis of the data from the first workshop, informed by the context and evidence review, systems frameworks and review of the Family Relationships Services Program, results in the following emerging options:

1. *Create and/or support integrated child and family hubs* – sitting at the meso level, the creation of a child and family hub aligns with the context and evidence review and brings together multiple themes arising from the workshop data including Place-Based Services/Hubs, Important Service Qualities, The Village, and Collaboration. Creating a hub aligns with the strategy of establishing a new institution and aligns with multiple key recommendations from the FRSP review. Additionally, or alternatively, RAV may consider playing a ‘backbone’ role in the community of Ballarat, as for example RAV has done in the Yarra Communities that Care® collaboration in the City of Yarra, convening families and service providers in an effort to identify local issues and respond to these around strengthening family relationships. The creation of child and family hubs may be considered to align with all four of Leadbeater and Winhall’s (2020) power keys – purpose, power, resources flows, and relationships.
2. *Create a role to foster connection between families* – sitting at the micro level, this option aligns with the context and evidence review regarding the core needs of people to connect. This could include developing a parent/peer role which aligns with Leadbeater and Winhall’s (2020) power key.





3. *Expand availability of home visiting* – also at the micro level, this suggestion from the workshop aligns with the evidence review that home visiting can be an effective way to engage families facing barriers to service access and can provide a more relational service offering.
4. *Expand RAV work undertaken in schools* – a micro level option connected to the Journey of Life theme. The idea of involving peers in this schoolwork connects to the power key. RAV could consider expanding into other areas such as workplaces, libraries, and other places families naturally gather.
5. *Develop a public health campaign around increasing community understanding of the importance of relationships* – a macro level option aligned with the themes of Relationship Promotion, The Village, Stigma, and Core Needs and with multiple levers for change including creating demand, design for mass reach, mobilise a shared voice, and attract a media spotlight and also aligns with Leadbeater and Winhall's (2020) purpose key.
6. *Explore using technology to enhance information provision* – at the micro level and in alignment with one of the FRSP Review recommendations.
7. *Review RAV services regarding the Important Service Qualities highlighted to determine areas for improvement and to enhance accessibility for all families* – at the micro level and aligned with the levers of improving regulations and standards and creating feedback loops. Undertaken with a lens of co-design, this would align with the power key.
8. *Explore any of the prioritised Sundry Ideas* – at the micro level, and potentially involving the levers of expanding the organisation or altering or reallocating funding, these included teaching social skills to parents and conducting an Action Research project on post-COVID school attendance.

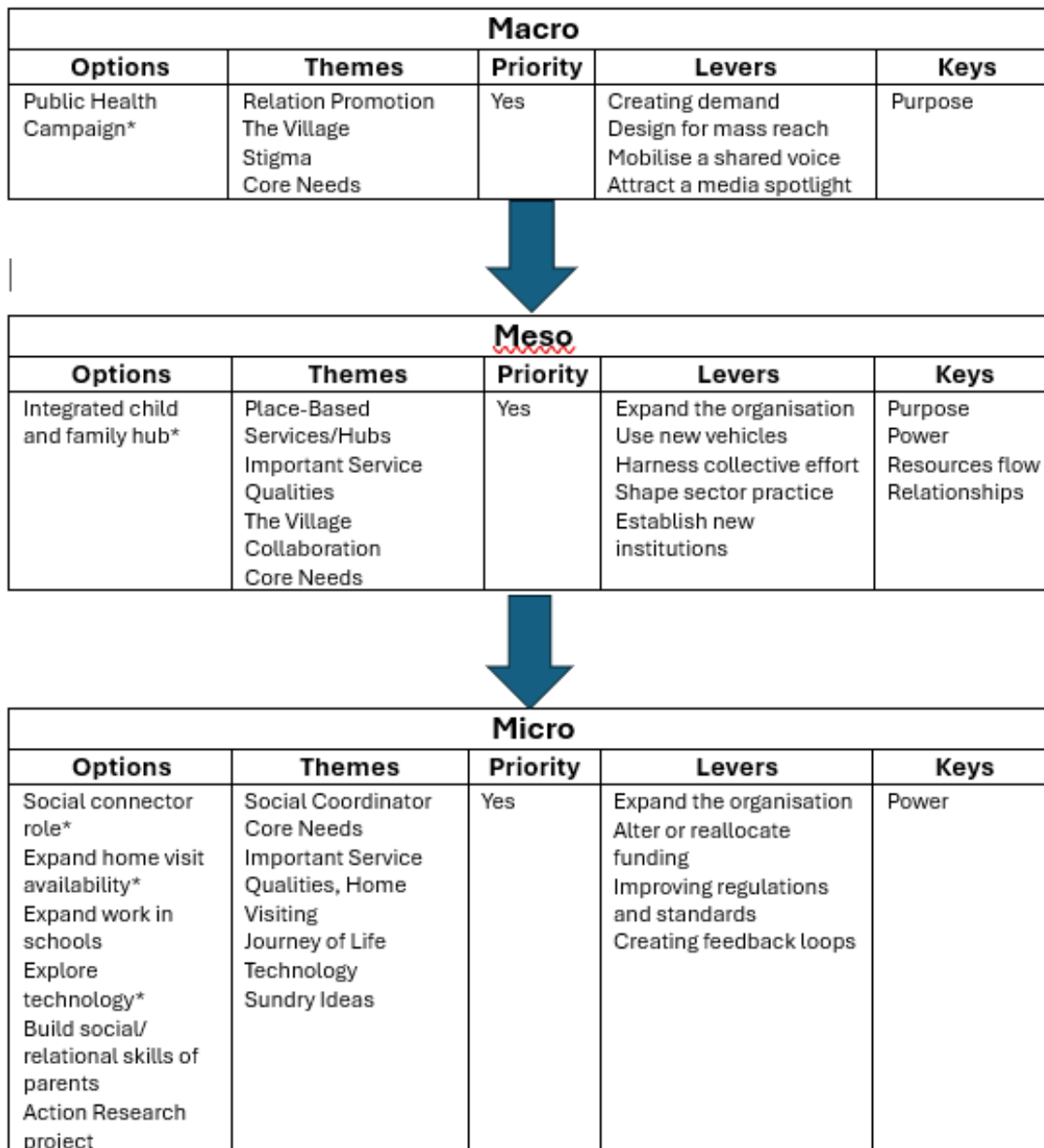
An additional consideration presented to RAV in the early draft of this paper, which did not emerge from the workshop data but aligned with the strategies of using data for transparency and insight, and creating feedback loops, as well as one of the key recommendations of the FRSP Review, was to explore *how to measure outcomes arising from the changes made*.

Additionally, arising from Bolton and Davies' (2021) strategies for affecting change, is the idea that RAV could choose to explore the options for developing talent and shaping sector practice. Through undertaking this project, RAV has advanced understanding of the role of relationships in the broader picture of family and community wellbeing and could consider sharing this information more broadly and in doing so activate other strategic levers in their pursuit of influencing the system to support children and families to thrive in their relationships.



Finally, CCCH also observed that RAV could continue a purposeful and meaningful engagement with a diverse mix of people, representative of the broader community to co-design the actions arising from this project.

The options arising from this process are visually represented below, at Leadbeater and Winhall’s (2020) levels of change.



\* Denotes alignment with FRSP Review, EYS, or BCSM

Figure 2: Emerging options for RAV from Workshop 1, mapped to Leadbeater and Winhall’s (2020) levels of system change



## Workshop 2

### *Prioritised options*

The three ideas participants selected unanimously were 1) Public media campaign, 2) Child and family hub, and 3) Social connector role. The fourth idea proposed but not pursued was around home visiting to increase social connection, collaborative service delivery, and warm referrals. This idea was discussed to some extent in the social connector role group. The detail explored by each group is summarised below.

### *Public media campaign*

The idea generated and prioritised at the first workshop to increase community understanding about the importance of relationships through information provision, a public health campaign, or some sort of advertising or media campaign, was the only idea placed at the macro level of change. This idea aligns with the identified strategies in all three opportunities for system change – the Family Relationship Services Program (FRSP) review, the Early Year Strategy (EYS), and the Ballarat Community Saturation Model (BCSN).

The participants from the second workshop refined this idea to be about using media spokespeople/champions to provide psychoeducation around all relationships, not just intimate partner relationships. Information the group felt was important to impart through this campaign included:

- What a healthy relationship looks like, including green flags and red flags
- The benefits of healthy relationships
- Normalising that everyone experiences challenges in their relationships and needs support sometimes
- That relationships are fundamental and as important as any of our basic needs.

The group also discussed why this topic is so important for all to understand – government, funders, service providers, community, people who are not engaged in services – and the importance of co-campaigning with other organisations to reinforce the messages. The group pondered whether action research could play a role in both developing and measuring the effectiveness of this option.

### *Child & family hub*

This idea came from a strong, prioritised theme identified in the data from Workshop 1 – Place-Based Services/Hubs. This was the only idea identified as being at the meso level of change. The idea aligns with the strategies from the FRSP review and the EYS.



The participants in the second workshop who elected to discuss this idea concluded that the concept of the child and family hub was deeply connected to the two other prioritised ideas – that it needed to be built upon a broader and deeper community understanding of the importance of relationships, and to have a social connector role operating within and across the hub.

The group felt that child and family hubs should be flexibly co-developed in different neighbourhoods in Ballarat, rather than creating a giant one-stop-shop in the centre of Ballarat. Identifying and building upon local opportunities to both co-locate services and build connection between families could be the starting point. Participants suggested that the hubs could be an opportunity to create links across generations and so options inclusive of services or supports for teens or elderly people could be considered. The notion of creating a place for ‘the village’ was discussed. The group felt it was important to have opportunities outside of normal business hours for communal meals or playgroups, and for there to be links with universal services such as libraries, playgrounds or the local shops.

Participants in this group expressed a view that RAV could play a role in influencing and expanding the concept of a hub arising from the FRSP review, beyond just the co-location of services.

#### *Social connector role*

This idea came from the prioritised Social Connector theme from the first workshop. It was one of many ideas at the micro level of change. The idea aligns with the outcomes sought from the EYS for families to be connected to each other, to help children and parents/caregivers to thrive and to build stronger, safer, inclusive communities.

The workshop participants discussed the specific qualities of the role and also the broader system needed to support the role; collaboration with other service providers would be essential. The group felt that the role would need to operate on behalf of the network and be connected to the open-door policy of a child and family hub, providing warm links to other services. The role would also involve enabling peer groups and community connection. A backbone role, it would need to be built-in and ongoing and supported by the whole service system. It was thought that a fundamental element of the role would be to connect parents to other parents in a purposeful way (rather than casually hoping this will happen). It was felt that an outreach function was also required to find the families who are not coming to a hub or other services/supports, and that it needed to be somebody’s job on behalf of the system to find and connect people, both with services and with other families. It was identified that outreach is expensive, particularly as it can require cars, and therefore RAV could consider linking with a service who already does outreach e.g. Child and Family Services.



The group felt that people most in need are the least likely to connect with such a role, and that providing practical support e.g. food bank, transport, community meals, could be a good way of enabling engagement with this cohort. Additionally, it was felt that it would be ideal to ask them where they would like to meet and be connected to such a role.





## Implications for RAV

Through this project, RAV are attempting to address the complex issue of how to positively influence the system to support children and their families to thrive in their relationships. In recognition of the complexity of this aim, the approach to designing solutions has combined published evidence with practice-based evidence from professionals and the lived experience expertise of parents and caregivers. The three key ideas emerging from this project are robust and interconnected:

1. Public media campaign – an advertising/public health campaign providing psychoeducation to the general community about relationships,
2. Child & Family Hub – cooperatively co-locating with other early years providers to provide integrated, easy service access and to provide safe spaces for families to connect.
3. Social Coordinator role – potentially a community back-bone role involving some outreach, connecting families to services and to meaningful connections with other families.

Consideration of the complexity of RAV's aim now needs to flow through to deliberation regarding implementation. The three options identified through the process of this project are likely to work better if they are:

- Implemented together rather than as individual 'solve-all' remedies,
- Tested and implemented with a learning/continuous improvement approach, collecting data to measure outcomes, and creating feedback loops – e.g. start in Ballarat, measure, learn, adapt, and then slowly scale to other areas,
- Connected to other relevant work that other parts of the system are doing and done in partnership with others, and
- Continue to involve families in the design, testing and delivery of the options. This involves the key of power sharing and brings the benefits of families' lived experience and continued family and community engagement, creating a strong foundation for success.



## Conclusion

Relationships Australia Victoria (RAV) engaged Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH) to assist them in a process to determine how RAV could positively influence the system to help children and families thrive in their relationships. The process was informed by theories of systems change and involved a review of the early years context and evidence, and two stakeholder workshops. While many ideas for action were generated through the project, three options that could be initially tested in Ballarat were prioritised and explored more fully by workshop participants. The three leading options emerging were:

1. **Conducting a public media campaign** to broaden and deepen understanding in the community and about the importance of relationships and community, what healthy relationships look like, and the benefits of healthy relationships.
2. **Developing/strengthening child and family hubs** as safe spaces for families to access integrated universal, specialist services, and practical help, as well as to connect socially with other families.
3. **Creating a social connector role** with the dual purpose of connecting families to each other and providing a connection between services. The social connector could play a role in locating new families and outreaching to them on behalf of the system, facilitating warm connections across services and families.

These ideas, having been developed through a synthesis of published evidence and community and service provider lived experience, are robust ideas that require further design and testing. Through this project RAV have initiated community and service engagement in the Ballarat region, creating ideal conditions for this designing and testing. Given RAV are responding to a complex issue, they are likely to have a better impact in combination (i.e. rather than using a silver bullet approach) and in collaboration with others, and will require a learning approach to their implementation, enabling iteration and adaptation as the options are developed.



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# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Workshop 1 details

This workshop involved:

1. A presentation of the key content of the context and evidence review (Alexander et al., 2024).
2. A small group activity, working through the following three prompts exploring potential avenues of action for RAV from a broad systemic idealistic viewpoint down to more practical and easily actionable ideas:
  - a. *It's an ideal world. Your group – with all the power and money you need - gets to decide on what family policies and services should look like for families in Ballarat. What are you going to do/provide/change to help support children and families to thrive in their relationships?*
  - b. *You've woken from your dream. The power has gone. Most of the money has gone, but not all of it. You're still excited about the idea of changing things in a way that will help children and families thrive in their relationships. You either work at RAV or you have mates who do. What role can RAV play in influencing positive change in the early years context that will help promote positive family relationships?*
  - c. *You are now fully awake. You've workshopped your dreams and you've brainstormed the big picture of influencing the system. It's time now to talk about the reality of how to start this. What can RAV do to start? What are the changes they can make, or actions they can take, to get started on achieving the dream (your dream/our dream) of supporting all the children and families of Ballarat to thrive in their relationships?*
3. A further group activity whereby groups chose a range of ideas they wished to emphasise or prioritise. Each group listed their ideas on paper and these lists were collected by the workshop facilitators at the end of the session. Each of the facilitators sat with a group each to assist with facilitating discussion and answering questions if required, and to gain a deeper understanding of the discussion beyond the written records provided by the groups.



## Appendix 2: Workshop 2 details

The workshop involved:

1. A presentation of the findings from analysis of the data collected in Workshop 1.
2. Small group conversation to validate the data analysis.
3. Paired conversation to identify three priority ideas for RAV to pursue to positively influence the system to support children and families to thrive in their relationships.
4. Pairs joining with another pair, repeating the above exercise to gain agreement on which three ideas would be best for RAV to focus on.
5. Sharing back of each group's priorities to identify the most common ideas (of which three were identified).
6. Participants breaking into three groups, one group per idea, to each discuss (scribing the discussion) the idea in detail, using the following prompts:
  - a. Discussion one – Build a picture
    - i. *What does this idea look like?*
    - ii. *What are the important features of this idea?*
    - iii. *How will it work?*
    - iv. *Who is involved?*
    - v. *What outcomes would you be seeking?*
  - b. Discussion two – Talk about action
    - i. *How can this idea be progressed?*
    - ii. *What needs to happen?*
    - iii. *What needs to be considered before it starts?*
    - iv. *Is there something that already exists that can be built upon?*
    - v. *Who needs to do what?*
    - vi. *How will you know it worked?*



## Appendix 3: Workshop 1 Data Analysis - Themes

### *Offering supports and services where families gather and/or other services are offered: **Place-Based Services/Hubs** (18)*

There were 18 data points relating to place-based services or integrated child and family hubs. Participants noted that place was an important consideration for RAV in supporting children and families to thrive in their relationships. Some participants spoke of integrated child and family hubs being a one-stop shop that could include short and long-term interventions that met a wide range of needs. Participants stated that ideally hubs would be the same wherever you went, and open seven days a week with transport available to get there. Some participants focussed on co-location with existing services such as Maternal and Child Health services, Parent Place, libraries, kindergartens/early childhood education and care, and schools. Other participants felt that going where families naturally gather such as shopping centres, sporting clubs, kitchen gardens, cooking spaces and other social spaces where people can be supported to connect “authentically” around shared interests was an appropriate solution. Wherever they were, it was noted that the spaces needed to be “kid friendly”.

### *Offering services in a particular way: **Important Service Qualities** (17)*

There were 17 points listed about qualities participants saw as important in-service delivery. These were:

- Easy psychological access - either assisted with warm referrals or no referral required (just walk-in)
- Easy physical access with transport provided if necessary
- Array of readily available services on offer, enabling choice
- Practical and validating – included embedded, reinforced messages, and practical basic, non-judgemental support
- In person, face-to-face interaction
- Focused on prevention/early intervention
- RAV services are integrated or connected with specialist services if required
- Diversity of staff reflecting diversity of families

### *Creating a social coordinator role: **Social Coordinator** (12)*

There were 12 comments regarding the idea of having a person/s employed for the sole purpose of fostering connection between parents/caregivers. The Social Coordinator could organise social groups, creating opportunities for parents to have longer-lasting, valuable relationships with other families who share interests with them. A parent commented that merely having the connection of having a baby around the same time was not sufficient but rather families at various stages could come together for common interests e.g. craft or art.





There were four points made about the role parent peers could play in facilitating social connection. One suggested the role of parent peer could be a paid rather than voluntary role; that parents could co-facilitate or have a champion role, perhaps like The Australian Centre for Social Innovation (TACSI) model; and another said that parent voice was required in fostering connection and in developing services. A view was expressed that having a professional facilitating social groups may make them safer.

*Providing support and services across the life course: Journey of Life (8)*

There were eight points themed as Journey of Life as they appeared to relate to the idea of offering supports at different stages of the life cycle, not just at the time of pregnancy or early parenthood: e.g. providing therapeutic supports in schools – perhaps more ongoing support for young people developing relational concepts, perhaps peer-led to be “engaging for young people”. It was suggested that support could be “intergenerational”, “universal”, “connect with workplaces” and there could be more support following a program, “... wrap around services” for all stages of the family life cycle, for example, *Tuning in to Kids* and *Circle of Security* should be available to all parents.

*Providing support and services in the home: Home Visiting (7)*

There were seven comments themed around home visiting. Home visiting was discussed as being more prevalent prior to COVID. It was suggested that since COVID, *Early Matters* staff have suggested home visits less and parents have asked for it less, although this has increased recently. There was discussion about home visiting being “good” and “helpful”, especially “if I am exhausted” and children were not attending school. One comment stated that home visiting should be an option for M&CH visits and pre-natal support also.

*Reducing or eliminating societal judgement: Stigma (6)*

There were six points themed as Stigma. Some of these points related to a parent’s experience of shifting identity as a new mother and joining a mother’s group where interactions were felt to be toxic and judgemental. One group noted that in an ideal world, all stigma would be eliminated around parenting so that parents would be free to seek help when they need it; there would be no competition between new parents, no judgement from society, and the community/society would take accountability for family wellbeing. One point related to the idea of having a Working Together Agreement in the community to help people towards a more cooperative and less judgmental way of being.

*Promoting the importance of healthy relationships: Relationship Promotion (6)*

Six comments were themed as Relationship Promotion. One of them pondered how we can ensure that every parent knows about the importance of relationships. Another suggested talking with media/communications people regarding advertising/ information provision. One suggested a directory of aged-based services/groups; another about how to identify and make contact with new residents to share information with them while another suggested



that RAV run a public health campaign to reinforce that “relationships make the difference”, while finally another suggested using a celebrity to help deliver the message.

#### *Supporting the creation of communities for families: **The Village** (5)*

There were five points placed under the theme of The Village. One point commented around it taking a village (to raise a child) and used the term “circle communities”. One spoke of the need to build community in “a safe space as the village is missing”. One merely said “Everyone’s responsibility”. One said that some small country towns can have a sense of community but only if you were born there and another mentioned the difficulty of making connections in Ballarat when you have not grown up in the area.

#### *Collaborating with other organisations: **Collaboration** (4)*

There were four points themed as Collaboration including: an idea for RAV to facilitate collaboration and be a backbone for the community like the Yarra Communities that Care® (CTC) partnership; exploring further what collaboration looks like to reach unmet needs, and auditing what works well with others for example Ballarat Regional Multicultural Council (BRMC). Collaborating with other local services would be essential if RAV were to play a leading role in coordinating a community/place-based approach.

#### *Considering the benefits and drawbacks of technology: **Technology** (4)*

There were four points themed as Technology. Two focussed on using technology to help parents find interest groups and local services, while the other two focussed more on the negative impact of technology on human connection.

#### *Advocating for additional funding: **Advocacy** (3)*

Three very brief points were made regarding advocacy and “lobbying for dollars” to fund the actions required to support families to thrive in their relationships.

#### *Meeting the core needs of families: **Core needs** (2)*

Two brief points were also made regarding the core needs of families for having “somewhere safe and secure to live” and for “financial security”.

#### *Sundry Ideas (9)*

There were nine points grouped under the heading of ‘Sundry Ideas’ as they did not clearly fit into any of the identified themes. These ideas included the notion that COVID had an impact on social interaction and school attendance in an ongoing way. The proposed options for action included:

- Teaching social (relational) skills to parents to help them build connection and community.
- Weekend playgroups



- Review RAV policies with a lens of co-design
- Examining whether the Foundational Supports arising from the NDIS review might present an opportunity
- Changing the name of MCH to family and child health
- Having “Family Child Health wellbeing workers”.



## Appendix 4: Workshop 1 Data Analysis - Priorities

- 1) Important Service Qualities (6) – participants highlighted that they wanted services to be easily accessible - soft entry, no silos, free. They wanted variety/choice, for face-to-face options to be available, and “practical basic support where needed including being heard and held without judgement.”
- 2) Social Coordinator (5) – participants suggested developing a role with the primary purpose of facilitating social connections between families. One point was emphasised regarding consideration of paid parent-peer co-facilitation/champion roles such as employed in the TACSI model. Another potentially opposing point was emphasised saying that while parents might be able to take over facilitation of groups if there was no funding, that would “likely not work ongoing”.
- 3) Place-Based Services/Hub (4) – participants emphasised the need for co-location with universal child and family services, creating a safe in which families could make long-lasting and valued connections with other families.
- 4) Core Needs (1) – one group emphasised that everyone needs somewhere safe and secure to live.
- 5) Journey of Life (1) – there was a suggestion emphasised regarding extending RAV’s work in schools to make it more ongoing and to perhaps have some peer-led work undertaken. It was suggested that children need to be taught “the importance of relationships and community early on”.
- 6) Relationship Promotion (1) – it was suggested that RAV could reinforce the message that relationships make the difference through a public health campaign.
- 7) Home Visits (1) – it was suggested to return to home visits because it promotes connection.
- 8) Stigma (1) – one group emphasised the need to eliminate stigma and judgement from society.
- 9) Technology (1) – one group highlighted that this had a negative impact on human connection.
- 10) Sundry Ideas (3) – participants highlighted two points regarding building the social/relational skills of parents to enable them to build community and connect, and also the idea regarding Action Research on school attendance post-COVID.